

Card Games

IN THIS REVIEW

BRIDGE COMPUTERS

Lifemax BridgeMate

Saitek Pro Bridge 310

SOFTWARE

Blue Chip Bridge

Jack 3.0

The Times Bridge/Bridge

Tournament Texas Hold 'Em

Ultimate Mahjongg 10

Ultimate Solitaire 750

World Poker Championship

A computer is the perfect playing companion for card games: it can improve your game, teach you new skills – and it won't take your money. Sue Gee shuffles the pack to find out which programs come up trumps

In this era of PlayStations, 3D shoot-'em-ups and online deathmatches, it is perhaps surprising that PC-based card games retain such an enduring popularity. Yet of all the applications included with Windows, the free card games – solitaire, hearts, freecell and so on – are probably the most widely used. Given that these games are free and perfectly adequate for whiling away your time, is there any point in paying money for a dedicated card game program?

The answer depends on your interests. If you simply want to play a couple of games of solitaire

as a break from work, the answer is no. However, if you are a fan of more complicated games such as bridge or poker, you'll find lots of dedicated packages that can help you practise your skills. The internet provides the opportunity to play against other human opponents, but playing cards against the computer has a number of advantages: it won't lose track of the played cards or miscount a hand, it won't take your money from you and it won't argue if you make a mistake.

Having a computer as your opponent also means that you can choose an appropriate skill

level. In the case of bridge, artificial intelligence algorithms are good enough that computers can now challenge the best human players, but you can use the computer's ability to remember what has gone before and play ahead to help you develop your own game.

When it comes to playing bridge against a computer, you have two choices: a software program for your PC or a dedicated bridge computer. In our round-up we have looked at both options, as well as a couple of poker games, a solitaire collection and a mah-jong package.

REVIEW BRIDGE COMPUTER

LIFEMAX BridgeMate

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £32 inc VAT

SUPPLIER WildDay 01667 451831

DETAILS www.wildday.co.uk



plastic case is attractive and the LCD screen takes up two-thirds of its top surface, with an array of buttons below.

The device is supplied with a booklet of rules and strategies as well as an eight-page manual of operating instructions. This is hardly necessary, though, as the controls are intuitive. The arrow keys enable you to select a card to play and make choices while bidding, and each arrow is clearly marked. When you press the Auto button the computer makes a contract bid or plays a card for you, and you can use the Back/Fwd button to redo play. There's a History mode that

enables you to review play, while the View button allows you to see the cards in all hands.

The unit is fairly limited in its play options, but it does offer a choice of six bidding conventions and its Set button lets you specify a manual mode for dealing cards, which means you can replicate classic games. You can interconnect up to four units to play against one another.

✓ Highly portable and versatile in its options

✗ Can't change bidding system

REVIEW BRIDGE COMPUTER

SAITEK Pro Bridge 310

RATING ★★★

PRICE £100 inc VAT

SUPPLIER The Bridge Centre

020 7388 2404

DETAILS www.bridge-shop.com



It measures 200x110x35mm and while it fits in the hand, it can't be considered pocket-sized. Its screen size, however, is almost identical to the BridgeMate's.

The rest of the space is taken up with various function buttons, which enable you to choose each card suit or no trumps, card values and double and pass options, as well as turn the sound effects on and off and activate the hint system. Two buttons let you see the score and your partner's or your opponents' hands, while View Info enables

you to check the current bidding system, the contract and the number of tricks made – information that's missing from the main display.

The program supports two bidding systems: five-card major and ACOL. It also links to the Saitek Pro Bridge 510 so that two or more human players can practise their skills while still using a bridge computer as an opponent or an ally.

✓ Suitable for beginners and intermediate players; choice of two bidding systems

✗ Rather bulky; doesn't save games when you switch off



REVIEW BRIDGE SOFTWARE

GSP
The Times Bridge/Bridge

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £9.99 inc VAT each

SUPPLIER GSP 01480 496666

DETAILS www.gsp.cc

Although GSP sells both programs through its website, they are identical apart from the packaging. This software provides an ideal introduction to bridge for anyone who hasn't played before. The help file explains the rules for both game play and bidding, and covers bidding conventions and scoring. The Hint feature can help you get started, and by comparing how you would play unaided with the program's suggestions you will soon have the confidence to play other humans.

Two more facilities that will help the beginner are the Review Play button, which enables you to see what cards you, your partner and your opponents have played, and the Review Bidding option, which shows the thinking behind each player's bids. There's also a Take Back option for when you have blundered.

The program allows you to select a bidding system at either beginner or expert level. It can use the Standard American and five-card majors bidding systems as well as the default ACOL system. An Advanced button in the Bidding Systems and Conventions Editor dialog box allows you to specify further optional conventions such as Strong 2 Clubs opening and Jacoby transfer.

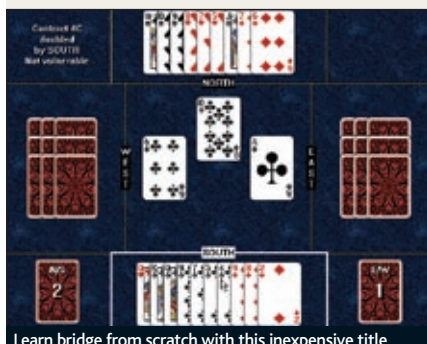
The other option that affects play is the Game Speed dialog, where a slider allows you to specify a slower or faster speed. However, the default speed is 90 per cent, so there's not much scope for increasing it.

By default, the program uses a playing area suitable for an 800x600 display and so is unlikely to take up the entire screen. This could be handy if you want to while away a few minutes while your PC completes some other task. You can also save unfinished games and return to them later.

✓ Suitable for complete beginners

✗ Limited facilities to improve the strength of your opponent

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98/Me/2000/XP, 100MHz Pentium processor, 32MB RAM



Learn bridge from scratch with this inexpensive title

REVIEW BRIDGE SOFTWARE

BLUE CHIP
BRIDGE LTD
Blue Chip Bridge

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £65 inc VAT

SUPPLIER The Bridge Centre 020 7388 2404

DETAILS www.bridgeshop.com

The Blue Chip Bridge menu has five options. The top item, which simply lets you get on and play, is suitable for those who are familiar with the game. Other options include interactive features to give you a deeper insight into bidding and game play, and to help you improve your skills. In particular, the Hint facility provides advice during bidding and the Show button explains the advice. The final menu option takes you to numerous endplay problems, all of which have complete solutions.

For complete beginners, the Learn option provides a 27-lesson course. The lessons include games of Mini Bridge, which is played without any bidding. Once you have progressed through six levels of difficulty, the course introduces bidding. The lessons cover opening bids and responses, doubles, redoubles and overcalls, and explains the mysteries of conventions. Again, this theory is backed up by an interactive section devoted to bidding practice.

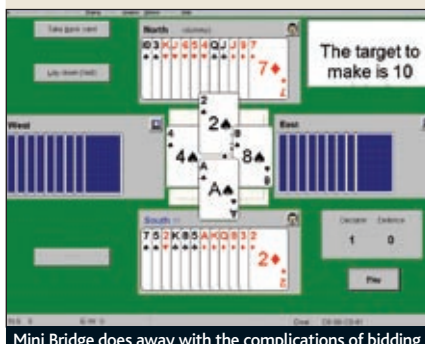
Blue Chip Bridge plays ACOL and five-card majors and you can choose which conventions to use. You can specify hands and adjust any deal. The software offers flexibility in other areas, too. You can review previous tricks, take back any number of cards and replay the hand, starting from any trick. You can even swap seats or rebid and replay the hand.

Graphically the program's options are limited to adjusting its colours, but you can opt to hear bids and cards announced. You can even record your own voice file, but you will need to create lots of .wav files (52 for the cards, plus no trumps, pass, double and so on). You can train the program to respond to voice commands using the Microsoft Speech Recognition engine.

✓ Versatile program that suits beginners and more advanced players

✗ Expensive and not as visually polished as other programs

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/Me/XP, 200MHz Pentium II processor, 64MB RAM



Mini Bridge does away with the complications of bidding

REVIEW BRIDGE SOFTWARE

KUIJF & KUIJF
SOFTWARE
Jack 3.0

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £60 inc VAT

SUPPLIER The Bridge Centre 020 7388 2404

DETAILS www.bridgeshop.com

The first time you open this program you are greeted by Berry Westra, a former bridge world champion and one of the program's developers. You are also offered the option of having Berry announce the bids and the cards.

Jack 3.0 is the current world champion computer bridge program and has a good track record against human players. Jack's strength of play depends on processor speed together with thinking-time settings, and you can reduce the level if you'd rather face an easier challenge. As well as playing against the computer, you can ask Jack for help with bidding and playing. You can also play with all the cards visible, take cards back and restart a deal at any time.

The interface is the most polished of the programs reviewed here. It displays 'English cards' that automatically become sharper and more attractive at higher screen resolutions. Jack also lets you play over a local network or the internet.

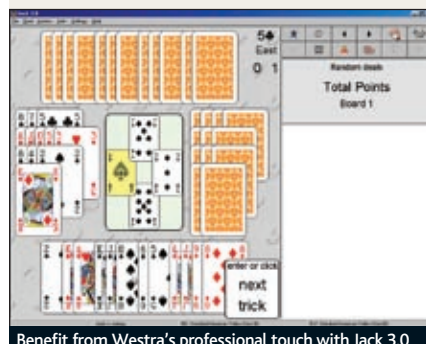
Jack has many built-in conventions including Standard American Yellow Card, Dutch ACOL, 2/1 GF and Jack's own convention card. Convention cards for novices are also available. Although you can't deal cards manually, Jack will load portable bridge notation (PBN) files, and you can save any of its deals in this format.

Many of Jack's features are designed for competitive play. It's supplied with several tournaments and supports various methods of scoring. Other features for advanced players include fit points to re-evaluate your hand and deal annotations, which allow you to add comments to a deal and store them. You can print the output, or redirect it to HTML in order to look at it in a browser, email it to your partner or edit it with a word processor.

✓ Highly polished interface; championship-strength play

✗ Relatively few facilities for the beginner

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98/Me/2000/XP, 200MHz Pentium processor (800MHz recommended), 64MB RAM, 40MB disk space



Benefit from Westra's professional touch with Jack 3.0



REVIEW POKER SOFTWARE

WILSON SOFTWARE Tournament Texas Hold 'Em

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £50 inc VAT

SUPPLIER The Bridge Centre
020 7388 2404

DETAILS

www.londonpokershop.com

Texas Hold 'Em is a type of Poker. This software doesn't teach you the rules of the game, but it has lots of custom options so you can determine the level of competition and the tournament structure.

In the default game, you and the other nine players around the table are dealt two cards each. You see only your cards and can decide to call or fold. As play progresses, other cards are dealt communally face up and players can bet, raise the stakes or fold. During play you can see the odds of winning the pot and, in all but the toughest level, you can use the Look button to see your opponents' cards. The other players around the table all appear to have their own personalities, and you can learn to read their mannerisms.

The high-quality graphics contribute a great deal to the fun of playing this game, while audio announcements add to the tension. It's expensive, but if you want to play poker over the internet, you can offset the purchase price by up to 20 per cent if you sign up to the EmpirePoker.com website.



Take on nine players with different personalities

✓ A risk-free environment in which to develop poker skills

✗ Expensive; doesn't teach you the rules of the game or give hints

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98/NT/Me/2000/XP, 32MB RAM, 40MB disk space

REVIEW POKER SOFTWARE

GSP World Poker Championship

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £9.99 inc VAT

SUPPLIER GSP 01480 496666

DETAILS www.gsp.cc

World Poker Championship is much less expensive than Tournament Texas Hold 'Em, but it provides four popular versions of the game: seven-card stud, five-card draw, Omaha Hold 'Em and a no-limit Texas Hold 'Em.

The software provides a scenario in which you play your way through the World Poker Championship series at six international casinos to earn a place in the Championship round. You start in the first casino with a purse of \$5,000 and only when you have amassed \$50,000 can you move on to the next one. To enter the final casino you have to earn a million dollars, so you'll need to take lots of virtual risks.

The program supplies 20 other players, each with their own playing style. To choose which opponents to take on you can view their bios, which give an insight into what you'll be up against. You can also play other humans.

We've awarded this program a Best Budget Buy award for its range of game options and its graphics. It is an inexpensive way to experience the thrills and spills of playing poker without losing any real money.



Take virtual risks to become the World Poker Champ

✓ Cheap; the scenario gives you something to play for

✗ Not much help for novices

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/Me/2000/XP, 450MHz Pentium processor, 128MB RAM, 250MB disk space

REVIEW MAH-JONG SOFTWARE

GSP Ultimate Mahjongg 10

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £9.99 inc VAT

SUPPLIER GSP 01480 496666

DETAILS www.gsp.cc

Mah-jong is not a card game as it is played with tiles, but it has enough similarities with Solitaire for us to include this title in our review. The object of the game is to remove all the tiles from play by clicking on matching tiles. Players can remove only tiles whose left or right edge is exposed.

The software provides 10 variants, including the traditional basic single-player game, Solitaire, its two-player counterpart and a Tournament version. Other options include Arcade play, which brings some Tetris-style action to the traditional mah-jong game, and Memory, in which you turn over pairs of tiles and remove them from the layout if they match.

Ultimate Mahjongg 10 is perfect for novice players as it has a Tutorial mode and a Show Match facility, which highlights pairs of tiles that can be removed. You can play in a timed or untimed environment, and the software has three levels of difficulty.

This program's highlights are its graphics and optional sound effects. Ultimate Mahjongg 10 features animated tiles that respond visibly before disappearing, and it provides 400 tile sets and 300 layouts.



Remove tiles to win the ancient game of mah-jong

✓ Suitable for those who have never played the game before

✗ Traditionalists may not like some of its variations

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/Me/XP, 90MHz Pentium processor, 16MB RAM

REVIEW SOLITAIRE SOFTWARE

GSP Ultimate Solitaire 750

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £9.99 inc VAT

SUPPLIER GSP 01480 496666

DETAILS www.gsp.cc

Solitaire, or patience, has a long history, and there are hundreds of variations on the basic game. This software lets you choose from a very long list, conveniently arranged into categories, of games that involve up to four decks of cards. The Help file has enough general information to enable you to grasp the basics of each game. It explains jargon such as tableaux, which are the main piles of cards laid out at the beginning of the game, and the foundation piles, which are the destination piles for the cards.

Help is available during play if you need it, and the Tutor facility will even suggest a move, which can be useful when you get stuck. There's also an Autoplay option in which the Tutor plays the game for you. However, the help file points out that human players may be able to make better moves than the auto player. Another option, Show Hidden cards, makes matters easier by turning all the cards face up.

A lot of emphasis is placed on the graphics options this software offers – 80 backgrounds and over 60 playing card designs – but the rendering slows down card movement and can make the game seem unresponsive. **CS**



Cheat your way out of a corner in Solitaire 750

✓ Vast choice of solitaire games

✗ Can seem sluggish due to its rendering method

REQUIREMENTS Windows 98/Me/2000/XP, 64MB RAM, 200MB disk space